

Sermon at National Pilgrimage to Carfin – 5 September 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

My aim in this homily is to demonstrate something of the continuity of our faith throughout the years since it was first brought to us. To suggest that whereas our time is on a different scale to God's time, the Church shares God's time since it is part of His eternal plan. And furthermore, in the context of our preparations for the Holy Father's imminent visit, to show that the example of the Saints in fidelity to the gospel of Christ, is still relevant to our own lives and the mission of the Church in very different historical circumstances.

I take my departure from the words of today's readings for the 23rd Sunday of the year – from the psalm and its response: "O Lord you have been our refuge from one generation to the next... To your eyes a thousand years are like yesterday, come and gone, no more than a watch in the night!"

We do not individually have such years within which to harvest memories. Yet there are many among us who can recall Pope John Paul's visit in June 1982, and who expect to create a bridge of memory between that event and the one we anticipate in two weeks time, when the slopes of Bellahouston Park will be blessed once more by the footsteps of the Vicar of Christ.

I can never recall Bellahouston 1982 without seeming to hear again the words of the hymn with which the Mass concluded "How lovely on the Mountains are the feet of him who brings good news – announcing peace, proclaiming news of happiness – our God reigns!"

These words will echo anew at Bellahouston since our Mass on September 16th will commence with this hymn.

By happy chance – I would prefer to say by gracious providence - the Holy Father arrives among us on the feast of St Ninian, the first named bishop and missionary of our land. I read that he may have been born in the north of what is now England. What would appear to be certain – from his name alone – is that he was a son of Roman Britain and that he planted the faith on the southern shores of what is now Scotland, some 1600 years ago.

We may not know by experience the early effects of that mission, which may well have started as tradition asserts, in Rome itself. But in a sense the Church does know and experience its effects through the continuity of its Catholic faith. And the nation knows it since through Ninian and those who followed him our country was gradually formed. History tells us of St Columba's mission, he came from Northern Ireland – to which, in Ninian's time, other British missionaries such as Patrick had carried the faith. Columba's monks formed their base on Iona and planted the seeds of faith, establishing the earliest Christian communities on the shores of our sea lochs and river estuaries just as Kentigern did in Stathclyde, while the inheritors of Ninian's mission converted the picts and Britains. Our highland glens opened a path to them: "How lovely on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, announcing peace, proclaiming news of happiness..."

We ought not to conceal the fact however that though the gospel of peace was planted, it had to suffer the tempests of war. Scotland was a country in the making. Warring tribes of Celts and Picts, who even the Romans failed to conquer fought for supremacy. In the 8th

century Angus, King of the Picts, won a victory attributed to the intervention of St Andrew and his cross, the white saltire was eventually to distinguish the nation of the Scots.

There were however several centuries of harassment of destruction and pillage issuing from the Nordic lands. The Church retreated with the people inland; the bones of Columba were taken to Dunkeld and the bodies of kings interred at Dunfermline. It was a long winter which gave way to an extraordinary Spring when the Norsemen (Normans), were themselves converted to the gospel of Christ and ceased their plundering, settling in the lands they once stripped. It is not by chance that the county which in the north extends from West to East and borders the Pentland Firth is called Sutherland – from the shores of Norway it is indeed Southern!

A new order was developing and the Church was ripe for reform. That reform came through Margaret, great niece of the penultimate Saxon King of England, St Edward the Confessor. Born in exile in Hungary, and accompanying her brother Edgar, heir to the throne, she came to England while Harold was king but had to seek exile again when William the Conqueror invaded Saxon England – 1066 and all that.

In the providence of God the ship carrying the Saxon royal family was driven north and the rest is – if not romance – a marriage with the King of Scots, Malcolm Canmore, which not only produced three of Scotland's best kings – Edgar, Alexander and St David – but a queen – Matilda – for William's successor Henry I thereby uniting Norman and Saxon dynasties.

The marriage of Margaret and Malcolm was in 1070 nearly 1000 years ago and here we are a millennium later commemorating her life and influence. Indeed those words ring true ... "to your eyes Lord, a thousand years are like yesterday, come and gone, no more than a watch in the night!"

There was a replanting of the Church when Margaret and her sons were on the throne. Five of our present dioceses owe their medieval identities to Alexander I and David (in the case of Glasgow while he was still Earl David).

The Benedictines were brought to Scotland and the ruins of Dunfermline Abbey still bear testimony to the royal foundation which was matched elsewhere, most particularly in the Border lands of Scotland. Through them a civilising and educational current swept over our land. The discipline of the Church was renewed and the reforms taking place in mainland Europe were introduced. (There is a letter of St Bernard of Clairvaux to David in which he is addressed as, "the most excellent king of Scotland, worthy of all love in Christ" whose "fair renown" stirs "the desire to meet you in person").

But it was perhaps above all the character of his mother, St Margaret, which had the greatest impact on our country. An eminent historian wrote "For purity of motives, for an earnest desire to benefit the people among whom her lot was cast, for a deep sense of religion and great personal piety, for the unselfish performance of whatever duty lay before her and for entire self abnegation, she is unsurpassed" and he adds: "No more beautiful character has been recorded in history". (Skene)

St Margaret is the patroness of the Union of Catholic Mothers who are always a feature of this pilgrimage. How apt is this patronage, because with regard to our own children, St Margaret's biographer tells us that in her royal nursery, though every part of the child's being was developed, her children were taught first of all to love Christ: "If you love Him my darlings, He will give you prosperity in this life and everlasting happiness with all the saints".

We have a picture of her children carrying the offertory gifts in procession in the Chapel Royal. But for me, one of the loveliest images of all is the following, penned by St Margaret's biographer, her confessor, Turbot: "Every morning nine little orphans were brought to her. She did not think it beneath her to take them upon her knee and to get their paps ready for them and this she used to put into their mouths with the spoon which she herself used. The Queen did this act of charity for the sake of Christ, as one of Christ's servants".

It is therefore also appropriate that St Margaret's name should be associated with our adoption and family care society and with Scotland's first hospice at Clydebank for both institutions continue Margaret's tradition of acting as "one of Christ's servants".

And that is what Pope Benedict is too – indeed one of his titles is "The servant of the servants of God". And here is another advantage for us in Scotland – on his arrival in Edinburgh the Holy Father will be received by a descendent of St Margaret, her Majesty the Queen, at Holyrood House named after the Holy Rood or Cross which St Margaret called for on her deathbed, and which her son David gave as a relic to the Augustinian priory he founded at the end of the Royal Mile – from his castle in Edinburgh, where the chapel dedicated to his mother still exists.

After nearly 1000 years her example and her memory can inspire us still: "To your eyes Lord a thousand years are like yesterday, come and gone, no more than a watch in the night... in the morning fill us with your love; we shall exult and rejoice all our days".